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Discourses of difference in gender equity policy in Australian education: feminism and marginalisation

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Introduction

Despite the considerable attention which has been given to equity and social justice in education over the years, both in theory and in the policy literature, achieving social justice remains an important theme in Australian education. The emphasis given to equity issues by governments may wax and wane according to political priorities, however, the issues remain on policy agendas, albeit precariously. There have been many changes over the years in the approaches to addressing educational inequalities, and in the language used in policy documents. Such changes reflect developments in theory and research; they also reflect new challenges which arise from changing contexts – both local and global. Thus achieving social justice is an on-going project; it is never complete and there are always new and emerging priorities which need to be addressed.

My concern in this paper is the on going debate about how to balance two key aspects of social justice - redistribution and recognition of difference - in gender equity policy. I focus on difference in relation to gender equity policy because of my own experience and research in this area. The issues discussed in the paper are relevant to all of the equity areas, but have been particularly prominent in debates around gender equity policy due to the close relationship between feminist theory and gender equity policy (to be discussed further in the paper). As a result, the debates about feminism and difference which occurred through the late 1980s and 1990s, were reflected to some extent in the rhetoric of gender equity policy documents at the time. However, a number of writers (for example, Ang 1995, Fraser 1997, Yates 1998) have commented on the difficulty of resolving the redistribution-recognition dilemma in *practice*.

I am interested in understanding why resolving this dilemma has proved to be so difficult. In the paper I analyse the history of gender equity reform in relation to difference, with particular emphasis on Indigenous issues, applying recent theoretical understandings about equity and difference. The paper documents how discourses difference were framed and addressed in four major gender equity policy documents produced at the national level in Australia. In particular there is an emphasis on how the redistribution-recognition dilemma is handled in the documents.

Although the development of gender equity policies in education in Australia has been well researched (Kenway 1990, Henry and Taylor 1993, Yates 1993, 1998), little attention has been given to difference, particularly with respect to issues specifically relating to Indigenous women and girls (Herbert 1997). In my view, it is important that

these issues are documented in order to understand the background to contemporary policy issues. Additionally, the opportunity to reflect on this aspect of Australia's history of reform, with the benefits of hindsight and recent theoretical understandings, has the potential to provide new insights for the future.

In the paper I argue that the role of the second wave feminists in placing gender equity policies on education policy agendas, and the femocrats who developed and implemented the policies, shaped the ways in which issues of difference were dealt with in gender equity policies. Also influential were Australian traditions of reform in equity policy more generally. In my view, understanding how such factors influenced gender equity policy development, and how they may have limited progress in taking account of difference, provides an important basis for developing alternative strategies for change.

Theoretical perspectives

These issues are explored within a broad interest in social movements, policy processes, and social change. I use a discourse theory approach (Fairclough 1992, Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999) to explore the relationship between policy texts and their historical, political, social and cultural contexts. From such a perspective, policy making is viewed as an arena of struggle over meaning, or as 'the politics of discourse' (Yeatman 1990), with policies as the outcomes of struggles 'between contenders of competing objectives, where language - or more specifically discourse - is used tactically' (Fulcher 1989, p. 7). The cultural context is particularly relevant in relation to the policy projects of social movements such as the women's movement: common sense discourses within the community are 'picked up' and articulated strategically in struggles for reform. As explained by Muetzenfeldt: '... the various projects of state institutions, party politics and social movements draw on the social categories, resources and meanings that are made available and reproduced through the practices of the wider society' (1992, p. 2). Further, these projects then impact on wider society by shaping social categories. Conversely, popular discourses in the wider community may be used strategically by governments to marginalise alternative discourses, as for example in the on-going attempts by the Prime Minister, John Howard, and former Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, to dehumanise and demonise refugees and asylum seekers in Australia.

Social movements engage principally in symbolic contestation of dominant representations in society, and are 'both reliable and creative in making visible the issues which have to be faced' (Yeatman 1994, p. 113-14). The effectiveness of social movements is based on the way they are able to link people together in groups and build communities. Therefore both symbolic and networking aspects need to be taken into account in theorising the relationship between social movements and policy processes. Fundamental to the development of social movements is that they come together around shared values. In the case of the second wave women's movement in Australia, the shared values were based on feminism, and a major focus of their activism at this time was reforming education for women and girls.

Before moving to the main focus of the paper, the document analysis, it is important to provide background and contextual information about the traditions of reform in equity policy in Australia, and about the role of feminist activists in the development of gender equity policies in Australia.

Background and context

Approaches to equity policy in Australia

Gender equity policies were developed within the broader traditions of reform relating to equity policy in education more generally. Changes in approach over close to three decades have reflected developments in theory and research on social justice and education. A brief overview of these trends is relevant to the concerns of this paper.

Equity issues moved on to the Commonwealth's education policy agenda in the 1970s under the Whitlam Labor government when a number of groups were identified as being 'educationally disadvantaged' and needing special attention. These 'disadvantaged' groups were: girls, Aborigines, migrants, rural students and students with disabilities (Taylor and Henry 2000). Commonwealth Special Programs were set up to address inequalities in these 'target groups', and these programs were maintained by successive governments until the early 1990s when they were brought together in the process of 'broad banding'. At the same time, there was a shift from the earlier targeted approaches to the 'mainstreaming' of equity issues.

These shifts represented a move away from a *redistributive* approach to addressing inequalities towards an increasing emphasis being given to the issue of *difference*. It was argued that it was necessary to take account of the way that the different dimensions of inequality (class, gender, ethnicity etc.) are interrelated, and also to take account of cultural as well as economic factors in educational disadvantage (Taylor and Henry 2000). As a result, the need to bring redistributive (or target group) strategies into balance with strategies to promote the valuing of diversity (recognition of difference) strategies became increasingly significant during the period of gender equity policy development which is the concern of this paper. These changes in approach in equity policy reflected debates in the literature about the appropriate balance between redistribution and the 'recognition of difference' in equity policy (Fraser 1997, Young 1990).

The issues involved in 'dealing with difference' in equity policies in education are complex, because redistribution and recognition of difference often need to be pursued simultaneously in addressing social injustices. For example, race based inequalities have a socio-economic component which demand a redistributive approach, as well as a cultural component for which a recognition approach is necessary (Fraser 1997). The 'redistribution-recognition dilemma' (Fraser 1997, p. 13) is that both redistribution and recognition of difference need to be considered and brought together in policies for social justice, but this is difficult to achieve in practice because the two approaches have contradictory aims and are in tension.

In this context, Yates (1998) points to some of the problems with attempting to take seriously differences among girls by working with their diverse backgrounds and values:

> The strength of this way of thinking about girls is that it begins to de-essentialize girls as a group; its weakness is that it is harder to say what the rhetoric of this strategy means as a practice. Ironically, the focus on differences of ethnicity, race and class within gender projects can, in the ways they are taken up in practice,

> actually weaken rather than extend the politics of reform for girls, can reinstate stereotyped and deficit visions of particular groups of girls (p. 164).

Feminism and education policy

This section provides a review of the historical background to the involvement of the women's movement in the development of gender equity policies in Australia, which I argue is relevant to how Indigenous issues were addressed in those policies.

The discussion draws on an earlier interview based study which documented the contribution of feminists in the teacher unions in the campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s to put gender issues on education policy agendas in Australia (Taylor 2001). This research highlighted the relationships between teacher unions, the women's movement and governments in education policy processes, and traced how feminist discourses came to be placed on education policy agendas, and how they later became marginalised. The research documented the struggles of women within the male dominated teachers' unions and the strategies they used to achieve their goals. They fought campaigns on three fronts: firstly to gain a voice within their unions, secondly to see gender equity accepted as a legitimate concern for the unions, and finally to pressure governments to place gender equity issues on formal education agendas. A brief discussion of the findings from this research (Taylor 2001) provides relevant background and context to the concerns of this paper: how issues of difference were addressed and framed in gender equity policies in education.

The teacher unionists achieved their successes primarily through the forging of relationships and new alliances based on common goals and shared feminist values. They extended networks within the unions to women teachers in the schools, and collaborated with other feminist groups and organisations, nationally and internationally. As a result of this extensive networking they were able to become a powerful force for change.

Other factors, relating to the broader political and cultural context, were also relevant to their achievements. Labor governments at state and Commonwealth levels were supportive and provided resources to address gender issues. This support was based on the close relationships between the Labor party and the unions, and a shared commitment to equity values. Where governments were supportive of gender equity, femocrats were appointed within the bureaucracies to develop and implement policies for women and girls. This was a general feature of feminism in Australia during this period, which Marilyn Lake refers to as 'institutionalised feminism', or 'state feminism'. She writes:

> It was in the 1970s and 1980s … that the institutionalisation of feminism reached its apotheosis, with whole programs and complex administrative machinery established by governments – federal and state – to promote the status of women, equal opportunity, non-discrimination and finally affirmative action (1999, p. 253).

The alliances made by the activists with femocrats in Commonwealth and state bureaucracies were crucial to the achievement of their goals. And it is hardly surprising that close alliances formed between the feminist teachers and the femocrats, given that they shared feminist values, came from similar white 'Anglo' backgrounds, and had common goals. Gender equity policies were seen by the activists as a means of legitimating and disseminating their ideas in schools and throughout the education

system, and were therefore an important goal. More specifically they were about legitimating and disseminating feminist discourses in education.

One question which arises from the research is the degree to which the gender equity activists *did* have a basis of shared values. Although they identified the values they were promoting as feminist, the interviews indicated that there were some differences in approach. For example, some of the feminists had links with the radical feminism of Women's Liberation and were cautious about working with the state. It is likely then that the alliances made by the activists to achieve their goals, bridged different types of feminism, however, they rarely engaged with any issues concerning diversity.

In the interviews conducted with the feminist activists there was little mention of Aboriginal or other minority women and girls. All of the twenty women interviewed who had been activists in the 1970s and 80s were white and from English-speaking backgrounds. It was reported that some attention had been given to the concerns of women and girls from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and some alliances were formed, but little attention had been given to Indigenous issues. One senior bureaucrat interviewed mentioned that she met with Aboriginal women in consultations conducted in relation to the development of a major national policy. She said that it was 'a very sensitive issue' at the time, but that they thought it was important to consult with Aboriginal women and 'deal with diversity'. She said: 'We didn't do it very well but we tried'.

However, a number of writers have characterised the women's movement as a white women's movement, and have argued that racism rather than sexism is the priority of Indigenous women (See Bulbeck 1999, Eisenstein 1996, Larbelestier 1999). Similarly, Marilyn Lake (1999) has argued that while feminists 'championed' Aboriginal women's rights between the wars (see also Paisley 1998), issues of concern to feminists in the 1970s – sexism, sex roles and sexual rights - were of little concern to Aboriginal women. Some attempts were made to include Aboriginal women in feminist conferences in the 1970s and 1980s, but in most cases these were unsuccessful, and on occasions there was confrontation. For example, at the 1984 Women and Labour Conference in Brisbane, Aboriginal and migrant women 'challenged the authority of "white" women and complained about the continuing neglect of their voices and experiences at feminist conferences' (Larbalestier 1998, p. 514). It is clear that these women felt that their concerns were not being taken seriously and that they were being invited to 'fit into' feminism on white women's terms. Further, Jackie Huggins has argued that many Aboriginal women have not been involved with the 'white women's movement' because they see it as assimilationist and because 'they haven't yet given us the respect and dignity that we deserve as women in this country' (1998, p. 62).

Gender equity policy and the framing of difference

This section of the paper examines how issues concerning difference were framed in four major Commonwealth and national policy documents dealing with gender reform in Australian education, with particular attention to issues relating to Indigenous women and girls. I will use the framework outlined by Lyn Yates (1998) in her discussion 'Constructing and de-constructing "girls" as a category of concern' to contextualise the policy documents selected for analysis. Yates identifies four main stages in the developments in gender reform in education: Girls as disadvantaged/ Girls as 'equally

human'; Girl friendly/ Girls as 'other'; 'Girls' as diverse/ 'Girls' as active subjects; and Power, sex and gender. As Yates (1998) observes, these different constructions developed in a linear way as developments in feminist theory and research informed policy and programs.

I will analyse one key policy document on the education of girls associated with each of the stages identified by Yates, focussing on how 'difference' was addressed, and with particular attention to issues concerning the education of Indigenous women and girls. It should be noted that, while Yates' discussion deals generally with developments in gender reform, and includes discussion about girls as 'other' in relation to boys, my specific focus is on diversity *within* the category of girls which has received little systematic attention previously.

Girls School and Society

The Schools Commission, set up by the Whitlam Labor government late in 1973 to advise the Commonwealth government on policy issues, took up inequality as a major theme. Girls were defined as a 'disadvantaged' groups, needing special attention - based on participation, retention and achievement rates. In 1975, a comprehensive report *Girls, School and Society* (Schools Commission 1975) was produced by a special study group to the Schools Commission. As Yates (1998) observes, at this time the category of 'girls' was constructed as a category of concern in a way which had not been done previously, that is, to *problematise* sex differences in education which had previously been taken for granted.

Not surprisingly, then, the emphasis throughout *Girls, School and Society* (Schools Commission 1975) was on girls as a homogeneous category. However some attention was given to different groups of girls. For example, in Chapter 3 of the report, in a section on demographic changes and labour force participation, references were made to comparative statistics for rural, migrant and Aboriginal women. And the two chapters dealing with sex differences in school participation and retention, and post-school participation in education (4 and 5) both documented and discussed the impact of social class differences. There was also a focus on difference in a chapter on 'Groups with Special needs' (12), where it was stated:

> The Committee was particularly interested in the experience of migrant, Aboriginal and rural girls and women as groups likely to be disadvantaged educationally. Despite extensive searches, little sex specific information was found to be available in any of these areas (Schools Commission 1975, p. 135).

The report comments that, despite discussion and submissions,

> … comprehensive data about the educational experience of all these groups are sparse. Despite its incomplete nature, the Committee judged that the available evidence should be presented as an earnest [sic] of its interest and concern and as a means of drawing attention to the need to gather further information (p. 135).

In the section on Aboriginal girls and women, the report stated:

> Among organised Aborigines questions of racial identity, equality and dignity take precedence over those relating to sex equality. It is entirely understandable

> that the most oppressed group in Australian society should in present circumstances see its group solidarity and group position as the first target of its efforts (p.143).

The only mention of difference in the conclusions and recommendations of the report was in relation to a recommendation to set up an Advisory Committee on the Education of Girls and Women which, among other things, would 'Identify groups of girls and women most in need of special assistance in education' (p. 167).

So, although the focus in this document was on girls as a unified category, some attention was given to 'special groups'. The discussions of class issues were successfully integrated into the chapters, but the references to Aboriginal and migrant girls and women were constructed as 'other', and largely marginalised in a chapter of their own. However, given the time, and the aim of this report - to focus attention for the first time on 'girls' as a category in education - these findings are not surprising.

Girls and Tomorrow: the challenge for schools

The next major report on the 'special educational needs of girls' was produced in 1984 – again by the Schools Commission, by a 'Working Party on the Education of Girls' (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1984). The working party had been established in 1981 under a coalition government, but the report was published after a Labor government had been returned to power. This report was produced at a stage in gender reform when the focus had moved to the processes of schooling and to making schooling more 'girl friendly', but girls were still being constructed as a unitary category. In fact, Yates (1998) argues that this was intensified during this period, because of the tendency to essentialise 'women's ways of knowing'.

Girls and Tomorrow recommended that a National policy should be developed to address the educational needs of girls. The overall emphasis was on girls as a homogeneous group, though in relation to the need for an adequate research base for the development of appropriate policies, the report recommended the promotion and support for research into 'the needs of identifiable groups of girls facing specific disadvantages' (p. 13). However, there seemed to be *less* recognition of diversity in this document than in *Girls, School and Society*: there is only one general mention of the issue, and none of the statistical tables on gender differences document any other social group differences.

A national seminar had been held in 1982 in association with the development of the report, and a list of participants who attended (which included myself) and papers given were included as an appendix to the report. The lack of attention to difference in the report can be explained in part by the fact that, while a few of the thirty four papers recognised and discussed *class* differences, only one dealt explicitly with *cultural diversity* among girls. This paper was entitled 'Non-sexist education in a multicultural society' by Josefa Sobski, a NSW feminist who was apparently the only participant from a cultural minority background (Polish). At that seminar, gender issues were under attack from a representative of a conservative anti-feminist women's group – The Women's Action Alliance – so once again the priority was to focus on girls as a group for strategic reasons.

The National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools.

At this significant stage in gender reform, girls were no longer viewed as a homogeneous group, and explicit attention was given to the differences among girls:

> By the late 1980s, the policy makers were talking about *difference*. Being a girl did not take just one form. It was up to teachers to be sensitive to the multiple differences of race, ethnicity, class, rurality, and to teach appropriately to these (Yates, 1998, p. 161).

The development of a national policy had been a goal of feminist activists from the 1970s on, and this was achieved in 1987. *The National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987) was significant as Australia's first *national* policy – having been endorsed by all state and territory governments as well as the Commonwealth government. A national policy in education 'addresses matters of concern to the nation as a whole in which a comprehensive approach to policy development and implementation is adopted by school and system authorities across the nation'(p. 11). It is also noteworthy that extensive consultations were undertaken across the country in the development of the policy.

The report – which was published using the feminist colours of purple, green and white – included a clear one page policy statement inside the front cover. The names of the members of the committee responsible for the report included the Chair of the National Aboriginal Education Committee – indicating for the first time in this story of gender reform and difference in Australia that there had been some consultation with Indigenous people.

Issues concerning diversity among girls were central in this report. In the Preamble to the policy it was stated that: '… All Australian schools should ensure that what is being taught does justice to girls and women, taking account of their cultural, language and socio-economic diversity …' (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987, unpaged). In the Policy Framework, three of the fourteen principles reflect the attention to difference:

> - Strategies to improve the quality of education for girls should be based on an understanding that girls are not a homogeneous group.
> - Priority in improving the quality of education for girls should be given to meeting the specific needs of those groups of girls most requiring support to benefit from schooling.
> - To improve schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls, school authorities will need to take account of the unique culture[s] of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Further, the report listed as 'Priority areas': 'Improving the information base and statistical collections including girls with special needs', and, indicating specific areas of curriculum reform, 'to include the contribution of women, from all ethnic backgrounds and social groups'.

The report itself reflected the new concern with diversity throughout - referred to as a significant issue which had emerged in the consultations:

> The need for explicit consideration of the educational needs of particular groups of girls and the relationship between gender and other factors of educational

> attainment, arising from differences in ethnicity and socio-economic status, for geographic isolation, and from physical and intellectual disability (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987, p. 13).

However, there was a silence in the report in relation to sexuality.

One section in the report discussed 'girls with special needs', where research and findings were discussed with reference to each of the groups identified above. Specifically in relation to Aboriginal girls, their 'unique educational disadvantage' was seen as resulting 'from the combined effects of cultural difference and subordination, socio-economic disadvantage, and attitudes to racial differences' (p. 16). The report was careful not to reflect a deficit view – using the term 'educationally disadvantaged', and naming racism and school factors as important in the disadvantaging processes.

The report mentioned that the limited time available for consultations and research was insufficient to gain 'a full understanding' of the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls. (These were the consultations raised in the interview based study (Taylor 2001) discussed earlier in this paper.) The Schools Commission consulted with the National Aboriginal Education Committee whose detailed response – The National Policy for the Education of Girls: the NAEC Perspective - was included in full as Appendix B to the report. This could perhaps be construed as an example of 'othering' *par excellence*. However, the main perspectives within the NAEC response were included in the body of the report and were thoroughly discussed. The main document reported that the NAEC's advice:

> … is that issues relating to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls should be seen in the context of an over-riding concern with cultural survival and development, with particular emphasis on the contribution of schooling to cultural survival and development, and to combating racism (p. 17).

Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools.
This report was prepared for the Ministerial Advisory Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs by the Gender Equity Taskforce (see Daws 1997, for further details about the background to these developments). The Foreword to the report refers to terms of reference which include: '… the impact of [gender] issues on the educational experiences and outcomes for both girls and boys and for different groups of boys and girls' (Gender Equity Taskforce 1997, p. v).

This document reflects the fourth stage of gender reform identified by Yates (1998), 'Power, sex and gender'. In this phase – during the 1990s - issues concerning the education of boys were added to educational policy agendas. Attention turned to sex-based harassment and violence in school culture, and also to those benefiting least from schooling. There was an emphasis on 'the construction of gender', and attention to diversity continued (Yates 1998, p. 162).

Under the heading 'Gender Equity in Schooling, Principles for Action', it is stated that:

> Understandings about gender construction should include knowledge about the relationship of gender to other factors, including socio-economic status, cultural

> background, rural/urban location, disability and sexuality (Gender Equity Taskforce 1997, p. 9).

The report proposed new National Monitoring Mechanisms for monitoring and reporting gender equity outcomes, and argued that more base line data 'disaggregated by such factors as socio-economic status, cultural background, disability, and rural/urban location, need to be established as soon as possible' (p. 10). It is intriguing that sexuality, included for the first time in the list of 'other factors' to be considered, is not included in the list of factors on the following page. In relation to reporting mechanisms, it is suggested that school systems should include: 'Significant achievements in attaining gender equity including those which target particular groups of girls and boys' (p. 11). Diversity is also mentioned in a section outlining 'Strategic Directions'.

However, there is an overwhelming concern with issues concerning boys as well as girls – reflected in the framing of the policy as 'gender equity' rather than the 'education of girls' as in previous documents. This is despite the inclusion in the framework document of a number of excellent papers which were presented at the Promoting Gender Equity Conference organised by the Gender Equity Taskforce in February 1995: on Aboriginal issues, the experiences of girls from cultural minority backgrounds, girls with disabilities, and boys and homophobia. It seems that the concerns about the education of *boys* had pushed diversity among girls to the margins once again.

Discussion

It can be seen that the ways in which issues concerning difference were conceptualised in these policy documents on gender equity in education were problematic in various ways. In the two earlier documents, as well as the most recent one, difference was conceptualised largely in relation to the difference between girls *and boys* as categories. The focus on girls as a unified group reflected the values and priorities of the feminist teachers in the 1970s and 1980s who worked to place the education of girls as an issue on formal policy agendas. At the time it made sense strategically to base arguments on sex differences in educational experiences, participation and outcomes, thereby emphasising redistributive aspects of equity. Ironically, the need to argue for the disaggregation of such data in the face of recent concerns about the education of boys, and to ask 'which boys and which girls?' (Collins, Kenway and McLeod, 2000a; 2000b), has assisted the move to focus on the diversity within both groups, and to give serious attention to what this might mean in practice. However, it is noteworthy that the particular needs of Indigenous girls were given some attention in all of the documents, though always from a 'mainstream' position.

It is clear that girls who were not from white, middle class, English speaking backgrounds were conceptualised as 'other' in the early reports, and a consideration of their needs were marginal – particularly in *Girls and Tomorrow*. In *The National Policy for the Education of Girls* there was a genuine attempt to make diversity a central issue and consult with Indigenous representatives, though those involved said that they 'didn't do it very well', and the report mentioned lack of time for consultation. The paucity of research in the area was mentioned in several of the documents, and the lack of understandings about Indigenous issues meant that recommendations in the area did not go much beyond rhetoric. However, Yates notes that feminist education groups 'accepted the emphasis on self determination that concentrated education reforms around the NAEC

rather than the girls' units' (1998, p. 80). In this context, the inclusion of the full NAEC report in the *National Policy for the Education of Girls* document was a significant step towards incorporating Indigenous views.

Given the political context at the time of each of the policy documents, the growing backlash against attention to the education of girls, and the related 'What about the boys?' debates (Lingard and Douglas 1999, Taylor 2001), constructing girls as a unified category was in some ways not surprising, and an example of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1987). As a result, the debates about the need to bring together redistributive aspects with the recognition of difference in equity policies (Fraser 1997, Young 1990), discussed earlier, were not reflected in even the most recent document analysed.

The issues highlighted in the policy analysis reflect broader issues concerning the women's movement in Australia. New social movement theory emphasises the cultural dimensions of social movements which are submerged in everyday life (Melucci 1989, 1995). It is clear that in the case of the women's movement these aspects have been important, together with the more visible action which has focused on policy, legislation and political change (Gaskell and Taylor 2003). The second wave women's movement was based on women's common experiences and interests, with the idea of *sisterhood* uniting differences and inequalities between women. As I have argued, although the concerns and needs of minority group women were taken up, it is clear that the movement was indeed predominantly a white middle class women's movement. Any attempt to 'include' Aboriginal women, for example, was based on presumed commonality by 'the custodians of the established order' of contemporary feminism (Yeatman 1993).

To some extent, this situation reflected the particular historic and social context at the time, when the movement was arguing women's difference *from men*, and feminists were pressuring governments to place women's issues on formal policy agendas for the first time. Policy initiatives were concerned with equality and redistributive aspects in the public sphere – and unity was achieved around these issues for a while – long enough for feminism to become institutionalised through the work of the femocrats who, as has been pointed out earlier, were almost all white women from 'Anglo' backgrounds.

Martin (2001), drawing on Melucci's (1995) work on collective identity formation, argues that 'the conflicts and tensions inherent in social movements will only be resolved, and a collective identity built, if the individuals and groups that constitute them interact with one another to resolve these problems' (Martin 2001, p. 366). In the case of the Australian women's movement such a dialogue with minority women *on their terms* has not yet occurred. Ang (1995) suggests that the lack of common ground between mainstream feminism and 'others' should be 'the starting point for a more modest feminism, one which is predicated on the fundamental *limits* to the very idea of sisterhood (and thus the category 'women') and on the necessary *partiality* of the project of feminism as such' (p. 61).

In terms of the policy issues emerging from the document analysis, the history of attention to specific 'disadvantaged' or 'equity target groups' in addressing educational inequalities influenced how issues concerning difference were framed in the documents. It should be noted that many Indigenous educators were critical of the use of the term 'disadvantaged' in relation to Indigenous students. For example Jeannie Herbert (1997), while acknowledging the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous families due to poverty

and racism, was critical of the 'deficit' connotations of the term and its association with notions of 'the indigenous problem'. As she asserted, 'While there is no denying that many Indigenous families are disadvantaged … they are not disadvantaged by being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander!' (1997, p. 92). Given such criticisms, policy documents tended to use the term 'educationally disadvantaged' rather than 'disadvantaged' in relation to the specific equity target groups.

The 'equity target group' approach was associated with the setting up of separate sections within education department bureaucracies to address the needs of specific groups. In the case of 'education of girls' and 'gender equity' units, their establishment as separate sections in Commonwealth and state education bureaucracies was also related to the activism of the women's movement discussed in the previous section. Quite often these organisational arrangements resulted in competition between the various sections for funding and other resources, and certainly worked against collaborative initiatives. Although there were some examples of cooperation between the sections, for example around developments in 'inclusive education' and 'inclusive curriculum', these examples were relatively rare.

As mentioned earlier, there are numerous references in the literature about the difficulty of 'dealing with difference' in policy and practice. However, in a recent Queensland policy document addressing 'students at educational risk' there is an attempt to grapple with this issue. It is stated that 'single dimension target group strategies are no longer enough to explain the interrelated and cumulative social, cultural, geographic and economic impacts on communities ...' (Education Queensland 2000, p. 3). Unfortunately, though, in shifting the focus to the recognition of difference, this document pays insufficient attention to the structural dimensions of inequality – that is, the redistributive dimensions (Taylor and Henry 2003) – again indicating the difficulties of taking account of both aspects in policy development.

There is an additional reason why resolving 'the redistribution- recognition dilemma' (Fraser 1997) is difficult to achieve in practice. It may well be that the 'balance' between the two approaches may need to change depending on the particular 'field of practice' and associated 'logic of practice' (Bourdieu 1998) involved. For example, the emphasis may need to be on *redistributive* aspects when the provision of educational services and monitoring of student outcomes are the concern. And it is reasonable to expect that national or state government policies such as those discussed in this paper would be most concerned about these aspects. However, in relation to pedagogical issues, the emphasis would need to be on the *recognition of difference*, with care being taken to avoid stereotyping based on student backgrounds. Such an approach would take account of the different 'levels' - from the bureaucracy, to schools and classrooms - which are relevant to gender equity policy development and implementation.

Implications for future strategies

In this paper I have argued that the teacher activists of the second wave women's movement, as well as Australian traditions of addressing educational inequalities, influenced the ways in which gender equity policies were developed and framed, and how they dealt with difference. Further, difficulties still remain in bringing together distributive and recognitive strategies in gender equity policy. As Martin puts it, referring to social welfare policy: 'The key … is how to translate into policy terms a

universal service provision that is also capable of meeting diverse and differentiated needs' (2001, p. 373).

In terms of the implications for education policy, it is clear that the 'one size fits all' model applied in the past is no longer appropriate – if indeed it ever was. In the 21st century in a global context, a more pluralistic model which focuses on particular school communities is needed. This points to a need for more democratic processes at the local community level and a focus on the particular mix of factors in schools, their neighbourhoods and communities which Pat Thomson has termed 'thisness' (Thomson 2000). Similarly, Gale and Densmore (2000) emphasise democratic relationships within and outside the classroom, arguing that democracy is a precondition for social justice. Their view of recognitive justice is based on self determination and participation in decision making for oppressed minority groups, and on taking the standpoint of the least advantaged (Connell 1993). In contrast to this view, the gender equity policies analysed here were developed from a mainstream perspective which marginalised the concerns of Indigenous women and girls.

In the last decade or so, equity strategies associated with the concept of social capital have emerged as significant in achieving social justice. Social capital can be broadly defined as the outcome of social processes which link people together in groups and build communities. Productive social capital generates trust and leads to cohesion across different social groups. It is argued that cross group associations are capable of breaking down cultural misunderstandings in order to pursue common aspirations. Cross group associations are able to build productive social capital and enhance social justice, and are distinguished from common interest group associations which do not necessarily promote social capital.

In the Australian context, another priority equity strategy for the future is Reconciliation. Community based reconciliation initiatives involve precisely the kind of cross group associations capable of building social capital referred to above. In the spirit of reconciliation, 'mainstream' Australian feminists need to do more listening to the voices of women who have been marginalised in the past, and support and form alliances with Indigenous and other marginalised women around their concerns. Only then will feminist educators find some common ground to work together with these groups to 'deal with difference' on their terms.

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